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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 001175

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/MARCHESE/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/04/2027

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SUBJECT: OUTGOING FRENCH AMBASSADOR ON LEBANON DEVELOPMENTS

REF: A. BEIRUT 1162

[1](#)B. BEIRUT 1165

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (S) Outgoing French Ambassador Bernard Emie, meeting with Ambassador Feltman on 8/4, insisted that his 60-minute farewell call on President Emile Lahoud was done for protocol purposes only. Lahoud took the occasion to praise what he claimed was a return to French even-handedness and hinted darkly at a temporary military solution to Lebanon's presidential transition this autumn. Lahoud also expressed worry about alleged plans to settle Palestinians in Lebanon permanently. As for French Foreign Minister Kouchner's initiative, Emie said that the French would see how they could use a package tabled by Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri to provoke dialogue. Rating Lebanon's presidential candidates, Emie characterized former MP Nassib Lahoud and Minister of Justice Charles Rizk as the best, with the three former ministers Jean Obeid, Farez Bouez, and Suleiman Franjeh being so bad as to provoke likely French vetoes. All other candidates were of various shades of gray, but with Emie mostly negative about the presumed compromise candidate front-runner, LAF Commander Michel Sleiman. Emie (please protect) expressed deep concern about what he perceived as a growing infatuation with Michel Aoun in Paris, particularly in the Quai d'Orsay. In repeating his frequent advice for the USG to keep in close touch with National Security Advisor Jean-David Levitte, Emie blasted MFA NEA A/S-equivalent Jean Felix-Paganon as being both wrong and vengeful regarding Lebanon policy. End summary.

FRENCH EMBASSY TRANSITION,
AND WEDDING BELLS FOR NEWCOMER

[1](#)2. (C) On 8/4, Ambassador Feltman met with French Ambassador Bernard Emie, who concludes his Beirut tour 8/7. Emie reported that his successor, Andre Parant, will arrive on 8/17, earlier than planned, in order to help shepherd the dialogue initiative of French Foreign Minister Kouchner. Emie confirmed that, as the French never received agreement for Parant's assignment as ambassador, he will serve as charge d'affaires until the issue of credentials can be sorted out, presumably after Lebanon's presidential elections and formation of a new cabinet. Parant will travel back to Paris briefly in time to make his 8/30 wedding to a Lebanese-French Sunni who will then accompany him back to

Beirut.

SURPRISE FAREWELL CALL ON LAHOUD,
WHO HINTS AT MILITARY TRANSITION SOLUTION

¶3. (C) Responding to the Ambassador's surprise at Emie's unexpected 8/2 60-minute farewell call on President Emile Lahoud (whom Emie had not called upon since May 2005, when the international community was pressuring Lahoud to sign the decree calling for parliamentary elections), Emie insisted that it was a purely protocol meeting, "dictated by diplomatic norms." Denying the speculation in the Lebanese press, Emie said that he did not "beg" for accreditation of Parant; "the subject (of Parant) didn't even come up."

¶4. (C) While Emie expected the meeting to be a five-minute session in which he spoke "only in banalities, like our support of the army," Lahoud kept bringing up new topics. He asked Emie to explain La Celle-St. Cloud talks, for example, when the conversation threatened to lag. Emie described his own demeanor as "correct but cold," whereas Lahoud was "warm and gracious, as if nothing was wrong between us." (The ubiquitous Lebanese camera spray at the meeting showed a lip-clenched Emie sitting on his chair as if poised to jump up at any second, whereas the eternally tanned Lahoud beamed.)

¶5. (C) Lahoud praised France's traditional friendship of Lebanon, contrasting it with the negative American policy by which Lebanon is only a subsidiary to be used in regards to larger issues. While criticizing former French President Chirac's Lebanon policy "rather aggressively," Lahoud gushed about what he saw as the recent French return to benign even-handedness. He described Kouchner's diplomacy as

BEIRUT 00001175 002 OF 004

"excellent." In a ten-minute attack on the alleged policies of PM Siniora and the United States, Lahoud warned against the dangers to Lebanon's delicate confessional balance of permanent settlement of the (mostly Sunni) Palestinian refugees.

¶6. (C) On the presidential transition this autumn, Lahoud told Emie that he would leave office on schedule on November ¶24. But he maintained his refusal to hand over power to the "illegal" Siniora cabinet, should parliament fail to elect a president with a two-thirds' quorum. Lahoud noted that there might be choice except to have a temporary military solution to the issue of Lebanon's presidential transition. Emie said that he did not ask Lahoud what he meant, for fear of inadvertently giving the impression that the French would support a military coup d'etat. Instead, noting that a military solution struck him as a bad idea, Emie emphasized the need for presidential elections on time. Lahoud also talked about the need for a new parliamentary election law and the need to use that law for "better representation of public opinion," which Emie interpreted to mean Lahoud wants early parliamentary elections.

¶7. (C) Ambassador Feltman told Emie that, judging by his descriptions of Lahoud's points, Lahoud seemed to envision the following scenario: A military government, claiming to be safeguarding the office of the presidency, assumes office upon Lahoud's departure in November. The military government would organize new parliamentary elections first, through which presumably a safer -- for Syria -- parliamentary majority would replace the pro-independence March 14 majority. At that point, the military, confident about parliament's choice for a president acceptable to Syria, would permit presidential elections and a return to civilian rule. "You may be right," Emie commented; "it makes sense."

KOUCHNER -- NOT KOUCHNER-MORATINOS --
INITIATIVE: USING BERRI'S IDEAS

18. (C) Following up the briefing his DCM gave to DCM Grant (ref a), Emie said that, while plans were not yet finalized, the French planned to convene a "follow-up committee" to the visit of French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner to Beirut and La Celle-St. Cloud talks. The follow-up committee, if it comes together, would consist of representatives from eight (increased from the 5-6 reported ref a) of the fourteen National Dialogue participants: Saad Hariri, Fouad Siniora, Hassan Nasrallah, Nabih Berri, Walid Jumblatt, Samir Geagea, Amine Gemayel, and Michel Aoun. Maybe French DCM Silva, as charge d'affaires between Emie's departure and Parant's arrival, will organize something. Asked how the French will handle the missing six National Dialogue representatives, Emie waved his hand dismissively. "They can come for coffee sometime." (Note: We predict that the mercurial Michel Murr, claiming to represent the Greek Orthodox, will extract his revenge somehow, should he be excluded. End note.)

19. (C) This proposed follow-up committee will look at how to move forward with a package idea to solve Lebanon's political crisis. The French propose using what Emie described as "Nabih Berri's ideas" as the starting point. Berri, he explained, proposed the following to Kouchner:

-- "Commitment to construct a National Unity Government" (NUG). The program would be an amalgam of the Taif agreement, the 2005 cabinet program ("yuck," Ambassador Feltman commented; "double yuck," Emie articulated), UNSCR 1701, Siniora's seven points, and "respect for Paris III."

-- Acceptance of the principle of a consensus president.

-- Agreement to mutual guarantees. The ministers in the NUG would agree in writing not to resign ("something that Berri used to tell me was constitutionally impossible but he now proposes," Emie laughed). The majority would guarantee that a two-thirds' parliamentary quorum is needed for presidential elections. The March 8-Aounist opposition deputies would commit to show up for the elections.

110. (C) Answering the Ambassador's question, Emie acknowledged that the March 14 side did not accept Berri's ideas. But neither, he said, did Hizballah, as Hizballah representatives told Kouchner that they would only discuss a NUG. Only Michel Aoun embraced it. Asked when the NUG was

BEIRUT 00001175 003 OF 004

supposed to take office, Emie said that Berri did not specify whether the NUG was before or after the presidency. But the implied sequencing indicates that Berri wants the NUG first, Emie acknowledged. The Berri initiative may not be the right vehicle, and it may never take off. But at least it can be used to convene the follow-up group, Emie said.

111. (C) The Ambassador asked about the reported claims by Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos to have become a co-sponsor of what Moratinos is allegedly describing as the Moratinos-Kouchner initiative (ref b). Emie launched into a diatribe against Moratinos' "shameless meddling." Noting that "we know who Moratinos is," Emie said that Kouchner does not share Moratinos' views that the Syrians have suddenly converted to playing a constructive role in Lebanon. "Moratinos is not part of our initiative," Emie sniffed.

PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES:
RIZK, LAHOUD BEST

112. (S) Emie (please protect regarding his comments on his own government) noted that, at some point, the topic of presidential candidates may become "irresistible" for Kouchner. Philosophically, the French should be working with the Americans and others to ensure that presidential elections take place on time and without Syrian control over the process. Collectively, "we should not name names." But

Kouchner is the type who may suddenly allow himself to be drawn into the "name game," Emie noted. In that regard, he said that he was including in his final mission report some comments on the various presidential candidates.

¶13. (S) Describing a spectrum ranging from white (good) to black (bad), Emie said that, in his view, former MP Nassib Lahoud and current Minister of Justice Charles Rizk were "by far the best." He lamented that Rizk and Kouchner had sparred over a lunch hosted by Siniora, when Rizk "was openly contemptuous" of some views of Kouchner that Emie described as "rather naive." The fact that Rizk speaks "impeccable French" may help to rehabilitate him in French eyes. Nassib Lahoud and Rizk were both "presidential," with "strategic vision." At the black end of the scale, to the point of requiring French vetoes should they become serious candidates, Emie placed former Foreign Minister Jean Obeid ("corrupt and a 'Syrian'"), former Foreign Minister Farez Bouez ("even dirtier than Obeid"), and former Health and Interior Minister Suleiman Franjeh (who, as a personal friend of the Asad family, probably has no chance).

¶14. (S) Emie relegated the other presidential candidates to the gray zone, with Boutros Harb and Nayla Mouawad being fairly close to the white. LAF Commander Michel Sleiman fell under Emie's "dark gray," or fairly bad, category. Sleiman is not a leader, and France believes that his ties to Syria remain strong. "There is the danger that he becomes another (Emile, not Nassib) Lahoud." Sleiman also has legal problems in France, having acquired (subsequently rescinded) French passports for himself and his family through forged documents. "Even if I give Sleiman a visa to visit France, I can't guarantee he won't be arrested upon arrival," Emie said. The Ambassador asked about Michel Edde, long rumored to be a French favorite. "Medium gray," Emie responded. Emie agreed with the Ambassador that Patriarch Sfeir seems to want Simon Karam, former to the United States, as President; Karam, too, was painted "medium gray." Ambassador Feltman noted that he largely shared Emie's categorization of the various candidates.

FRANCE STARTING TO FLIRT WITH AOUN?

¶15. (S) As for Michel Aoun, Emie paused. He said that, personally, he would put Michel Aoun in the "dark gray, almost black" part of the spectrum. But, he said, France is starting to look at him more favorably. Initially viewed as a "curiosity" by Kouchner, the French Foreign Minister found Aoun's willingness to play a constructive role in the French initiative to be refreshing. The fact that former French President Jacques Chirac loathed Aoun is now being exploited by those inside the Sarkozy administration who want to reverse all of Chirac's positions. While emphasizing that the phenomenon he was sending was only in a nascent form and could easily vanish, Emie expressed concern that France could

BEIRUT 00001175 004 OF 004

end up embracing him, "if current trends continue." Emie expressed the hope that Metn elections would deflate Aoun's balloon.

SEEING FELIX-PAGANON AS A PROBLEM

¶16. (S) Cautioning the Ambassador "not to write this down," Emie said that "the frustration of the Quai at being shut out of the game (of making Lebanon policy) for so long" is now leading to "acts of revenge" by the French professional diplomats. "You wouldn't believe" what some of his Quai colleagues thought Kouchner should say and do at La Celle St. Cloud and thereafter, Emie complained. Part of this is natural bureaucratic reaction to the Chirac years and the learning curve of a new administration. "But I am really worried" about the influence of MFA NEA A/S-equivalent Jean Felix-Paganon, Emie said, claiming that "almost every day" he

has to fight back bad ideas. Felix-Paganon is "wrong-headed," Emie said, going so far as to "want to trade away the tribunal. He doesn't recognize the tribunal as a real accomplishment!" He also described Felix-Paganon as "vengeful." Noting that he will be off the Lebanon portfolio in only three days, Emie urged that the United States stay in close touch with National Security Advisor Jean-David Levitte in order to "keep Felix-Paganon's crazy ideas from taking root." While Levitte is too busy to focus on the details of Lebanon policy, "he will listen to you."

COMMENT

17. (S) By all accounts, Emie -- whose often abrasive personality has probably earned him few allies in his own bureaucracy -- was one of the key figures in the Chirac administration who shaped Lebanon policy. So, while we defer to Embassy Paris for a more accurate assessment, we guess that some of his complaints about his government fall in the category of sour grapes, deriving from bitterness about no longer having the privileged relationship he once enjoyed with the Elysee and from resentment that the new team doesn't seem to recognize the value of what he has helped accomplished. Nevertheless, his concern about the direction of French policy is worrying and seems confirmed by such steps as France neglecting to ask Hizballah for a price for its admission to La Celle St.-Cloud as equivalent to March 14 participants. The fact that a discredited Syrian stooge like Emile Lahoud could joyfully describe Kouchner's diplomacy as "excellent" should alarm the French.

18. (S) What we have accomplished in Lebanon over the last two-plus years is impressive: the departure of the Syrian troops from Lebanon, the closure of Syrian Military Intelligence offices, parliamentary elections free of Syrian control, the establishment of the made-in-Lebanon cabinet of Fouad Siniora, the expansion of UNIFIL, the deployment of the LAF to the south, the creation of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, Paris III, etc. The list of accomplishments would have been considerable slimmer had there not been an extremely close, constant U.S.-French partnership on Lebanon policy. As we face the critical period ahead with Lebanon's presidential transition (which will also trigger the resignation of Siniora's cabinet), the French-U.S. partnership will remain of critical importance to our ability to achieve our policy objectives here. We hope that that the close cooperation between us and the French will continue in Washington, Paris, New York, and Beirut.

FELTMAN